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ABSTRACT

Interpretations of the differences between the African American child and the Caucasian child in North America follow two major trends. In one the differences in the African American child are viewed as deviance from the Euro-American norm and therefore inferior or pathological. In the other, the differences are viewed as deviant but adaptive forms of behavior for living in environments of oppression and poverty. In both these interpretations it is assumed that the norm is the behavior of the middle-class Caucasian child. The result of these ethnocentric assumptions has been the continued educational failure of the African American child. African American scholars should investigate specific behavioral patterns in the African American lifestyle in order to formulate theoretical notions and programmatic interventions which take cognizance of these patterns without necessarily seeking to modify them. Areas for further study include African American linguistic patterns, oral communication, people vs. object orientations, visual and motor skills, body language, thinking and problem solving, and spontaneity. (Author/PMR)

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CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS
OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILD

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There have been two major trends in the interpretation of the many apparent differences between the African-American and the Caucasian child in North America. These interpretations have come from the Social Scientists and Educators primarily, whose entire history as a "science" has been the repeated demonstration of supposed differences between the "races."¹ The first of these trends has been to assume that the differences observed in the African-American child meant deviance from the Euro-American norm and should therefore be evaluated as either inferior or pathological. The other trend has been to assume that the differences were deviant but adaptive forms of behavior for living in environments of oppression and poverty. Both of these interpretations assume that the norm is the typical expected behavior of the middle class Caucasian child. All other behaviors were considered to be unquestionably abnormal. Insufficient consideration has been given to the possibility that despite a shared cultural geography, African-Americans and Euro-Americans may conceivably occupy different cultural personalities. The "melting pot" concept assumes a kind of cultural homogeneity despite the compelling evidence of considerable cultural diversity in North America. The danger of economic, political and social reprisals by the dominant culture has led to a growing denial of evident racial differences. Since so many charlatans have paraded in the name of

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science the idea that difference automatically meant African-American inferiority, African-Americans have come to seriously fear any suggestion of possible variation from the Euro-American norms. As a result, many obvious dissimilarities between the two groups have remained unexplored. Such negligence rests solely on the shoulders of the African-American scholar because only he would have been equipped to surface these issues from the very essence of the African life experience in North America. The African-American scholar has instead dissipated his energies attempting to counteract the cry of "black inferiority" coming from the vocal and persistent Caucasian scholars.²

The severest casualties of the American educational and social system remain disproportionately and overwhelmingly African-American. Despite all kinds of innovative methods to bend the African-American child into the appropriate Euro-American middle class mode, the parade of failures is still led by the child who is poor and black. Head Start programs have been one such attempt to bend the early "twig" in the "acceptable" direction. Many other programs, dating from the mid 60's, have sought to "redeem" the African-American child. The inevitable outcome has been continued failure for the African-American child which has been even more devastating than the failures in the destructive system of enforced segregation. The decrease in academic success, the increase in dropouts, the decreasing age of drug addicts and the general social casualties among African-American youth attest to the overwhelming failure of the educational system and the social sciences to appropriately address the needs of the African-American child.

Increasing numbers of African-American social scientists are now approaching the issues of African/European differences as blatant

realities which must be confronted. Psychologists such as Syed Khatib(a.k.a. Cedric X Clark),³ Phillip McGee,⁴ Wade Nobles,^{5,6} Gerald Jackson,⁷ psychiatrist Frances C. Welsing⁸ and some others are seeking to formulate theoretical notions and programmatic interventions which take cognizance of these differences without necessarily seeking to modify the child out of them. These African-American scholars all agree that the so-called "science of human behavior" has been little more than the outgrowth of Caucasian social scientists seeking their own images in the mirror of human experience. Though much of the work from these scholars is still in its infancy, the implication of their research is that most of the normative statements about human behavior are little more than ethnocentric projections rather than generalizable statements about the human make-up.

In this discussion we will attempt to identify some of the rather dramatic examples of behavioral patterns of the African lifestyle. Though mostly anecdotal in format, our discussion is intended to be suggestive of trends for further investigation in the light of more attention being given to such behavioral forms and their psychic or environmental source.

African-American Language

Language variations are very critical in understanding the personality functioning of groups of people because words are critical in the formation of the thinking of a person. Psycholinguistics is an entire specialty which addresses this reality. There has been considerable documentation of linguistic differences in the African-American culture.⁹ These differences have been alternately described as dialect, subcultural idioms, or as simply unstructured distortions

of standard English. The African scholar views the language variation as an attempt by the African speaker to milk from an alien tongue the verbal expressiveness which is reflective of the widely different mental experience of the African in America.

The African mental experience is highly affective or is one marked by considerable feeling, not only in response to the chronic tension which characterizes the oppressed environments, but as a continuity of the high feeling tone of the African experience among African descendants throughout the world. Frantz Fanon¹⁰ and others have suggested similar variations among the African speakers of French in Africa and the West Indies.

The language is at best a symbolic expression of ones mental contents. The language evolved is based upon certain shared experiences and agreed upon symbols for the expression of those experiences. The English language and European languages in general have evolved to reflect the modal Caucasian experience. Characteristics such as the limited number of interjections in the English language fail to reflect the subtleties of emotions of a highly affective and sensitive people. Rather bland words such as "wow," "gee," "golly," etc. are woefully inadequate for the highly charged life of being African in America. Consequently, one finds a wide use of profanity and coined interjections among African-Americans in an attempt to reflect the more highly charged mental experience.

The limited and contextual meaning of the language is given additional flexibility by the considerable amount and highly meaningful body language adopted by the African speaker. It is important to note that the body language is not of the Freudian symbolic form which has gained considerable popularity among the dynamic psychologists. Such sexual interpretations of body language are far-fetched

in appreciating the communication. One source of considerable misinterpretation of African-American behavior is the tendency to view that behavior from the same reference point as similar behavior may be viewed in Euro-Americans.

The African body language is a modality for maintaining rhythm in expression as well as dramatizing that which the language fails to communicate. In fact one might view the body language of the African speaker as a highly exquisite form of pantomime. One observation frequently made by non-African-American observers of African-American behavior is that there is a scarcity of communication between parents and children within the African home. This observation has been used to explain the alleged language deficits of the African-American child when in fact such an observation is a misperception of a highly intricate imbedded communication pattern.

The mother who "cuts" her eyes at a "poked-out" child is a communication which occurs between that mother and child which transcends verbal communication. Despite the absence of words, there is considerable communication going on between the two parties. Most African-Americans recall vividly, instances of a parent throwing a casual glance (as seen by an outside observer) at them from the opposite side of a huge room and having that glance lead to immediate modifications in their behavior. The instructions are not spelled-out in explicit terms as they may be in the typical Euro-American family setting, but the message is clear and emphatic. The numerous connotations of shrugs and head-scratchings are quite pregnant with meanings far in excess of the simplistic interpretations ascribed to those patterns by uninitiated observers. The flexibility of frowns, grins, and eye-movements would be too voluminous to catalogue. The child described as "non-verbal" in the classroom has

frequently baffled unaware observers by his considerable popularity, leadership and apparent communicativeness outside the classroom. This apparent paradox would resolve itself for the observer familiar with the diversity of communication patterns among African-Americans.

Many of the realistic dangers of the alien American environment has led to the African speaker developing many grammatical maneuvers of considerable subtlety and ingenuity. One such maneuver is the adjectival meaning reversal. One very common contemporary maneuver of this nature is the use of the word "bad." A "bad ride" is an exceptionally good automobile. Some "bad stuff" is a product of exceptional positive quality. "Bad," however, in unpredictable instances can maintain its conventional meaning which requires an astute attunement to the subtle changes in intonation in order to recognize the switch.

Another such maneuver which camouflages meanings from unwanted audiences is the multi-connotation expressions. One of the most prejorative expressions which can come from the lips of a non-African is the word "nigger." Within the African cultural linguistic community the word has massive flexibility. It can be a term of warmly intimate endearment such as: "Yeah, Baby, you sure are my nigger." Or it can be a term of poisonous attack such as: "You, d--- nigger!" The differences in intonation, the time, the place, and the speaker will determine the meaning of the word. Again, the meaning shifts are indicated by tone changes, eye movement, raising of eye-brows and often even more subtle indicators which are very likely to by-pass the unfamiliar observer.

It is because of such subtle patterns that the African-American child is often misunderstood when communicating to an unfami-

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liar person. The child is likely to respond to the frustration by either rebellion or retreating from interactions with the non-comprehending listener. It is obvious that many of the inappropriate labelings of African-American children as deviant is a consequence of such misunderstandings. Similarly, many of the behavioral problems encountered by the Caucasian teacher may be a consequence of such breakdowns in communication. The opposite case is less true because of the considerable and widespread influence of "Standard English" the African-American child is more likely to^{be} quite familiar in recognizing speech of the Euro-American speaker.

Oral Patterns

A direct derivative of the ideas presented in the discussion on language is the importance of the spoken word in the African life experience. Different life experiences place less or greater emphasis on various sense modalities. For example the Euro-American people demonstrate a highly developed visual orientation as is evinced by the bibliomania which characterizes the American culture. The present correlation of a written tradition with technological progress has legitimized such a preoccupation with written material and has served to disparage alternative modes of communication.

Certainly, an oral system of communication is woefully inefficient in a culture such as this, but it is still the predominant mode for transmission of information throughout most of the world. The importance of oral or spoken communication to the African-American lifestyle is an example of one of the many continuities with African tradition maintained in the African-American experience. A casual observance of any community's African-American radio station will demonstrate how well-developed is this skill.

Oral communication remains the predominant means of information transmission within the African-American community. Considerably more than in the broader Caucasian culture, the spoken word is relied upon much more than the written word. This emphasis on spoken communication results in a highly developed auditory or listening facility on the part of the African-American child. This child develops an acute sensitivity to subtleties in expression and intonation often unobserved by the Euro-American speaker. Consequently, the child often responds to feelings communicated in the verbal expression which may even escape the conscious notice of the speaker. There is a particular sensitivity to hostile tones which the child perceives and responds to despite efforts to veil them on the part of the speaker. It is for this reason that often African-American children respond to unexpressed prejudice and hostility on the part of non-African personnel when the personnel may perceive themselves as carefully camouflaging their feelings.

Very often, the same child who shows little or no emotion or interest in the written word can be enchanted by being read the written word. The European child will usually seek to orient himself through visual modes because this has been the conditioning of his culture. His African counterpart with less efficient visual-motor coordination demonstrates considerable superiority in aural-motor coordination. The considerable difference in dancing abilities among Europeans and Africans is an excellent example of the aural-motor "deficiency" in Caucasians and the considerable advancement of Africans in this area. However, an African-American child with such highly developed coordination is likely to be assessed as retarded if he is unable to demonstrate a similar facility with visual-motor coordination.

Dancing is actually the translation of certain auditory rhythms into motor activity. Reading is the translation of certain visual rhythms into a motor behavior. Though the prior training for the latter activity is greater than for the former, there is no available evidence which necessarily suggests that the former activity is any less complicated. In fact if one were to compare the Caucasians who were able to master the technique of dance after dance instruction with the African-Americans who were able to master reading after instruction, it is likely that the success rate would be much higher for the African-American readers. Unfortunately, the IQ tests do not have a scale for the measure of aural-motor activity though there are several scales which measure visual-motor activity.

With this kind of analysis, we can begin to get a better comprehension of the disproportionate African-American ^{failure} rate in European-structured modes and media of education. These media overwhelmingly emphasize the visual modalities for instructional purposes and for assessment. In fact the educational and psychological literature is practically void of any data on aural-motor coordination and its relationship to learning. Only in cases of its absence, such as educational programs for the deaf, does one find any suggested relationships. In the meantime this highly developed facility on the part of the African-American child must be dissipated in recreational dance when in fact it may hold the key to some of the educational deficiencies confronting children of African descent.

People Orientation

One very important element of the oral tradition which distinguishes it from the visual tradition is the centrality of a Speaker in the former case and his dispensability in the latter. This cru-

cial difference indicates another significant characteristic of the African-American child's cultural experience. This characteristic is the considerable "people orientation," of the African culture. Experiences are significant to the degree that they relate to people in some very direct way. The charisma of many African-American heroes such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Barbara Jordan is linked to their considerable verbal eloquence. The facility of such leaders in the oral tradition serves to ignite the motivational fuse of African Americans as they are given instruction in a familiar and forceful medium. The dual medium of the spoken word and the living person serve to motivate African people. It is interesting to note that much of the response to the orator is only incidental to the content of the message. The rhythms, the cadence of the storyteller is as important as what he is saying. For effective communication, one would hope that there exists a correlation between the rhythm and content of the message and the medium.

The lesson in this for one who is interested in reaching the African-American child is an appreciation of the "griot" or "storyteller" in the African tradition. We can incite interest in the child by using the medium with which he is most familiar and most easily attracted. This can serve as a transitional method to move the child to exploring other areas of learning. For example, a story read with the lore of the storyteller can offer an exciting inducement for learning to read.

There are other examples of this important characteristic of people orientation throughout the African-American life experience. Because of its prominence it has been viewed as a maladaptive dependency in the personality of many African-Americans. There is a

marked group orientation among African-Americans, which stands in sharp contrast to the wider cultural norm of individualism. Writers such as Kardiner and Ovesey,¹¹ Grier and Cobbs¹² and many other traditional thinkers have related this orientation described by them as "dependency" as being an important factor in many mental disorders affecting African-American people. The sensitive observer would accurately observe that any African-American person who did not show such a high people orientation was, in fact, abnormal in the light of his own cultural experience. In an increasingly insulated and "inner-directed" society, the African-American encounters considerable conflict in adjusting to such alien behavior patterns outside of his cultural environment. The young child is immediately faced with this conflict when he is encouraged to be more of an individual (as the school emphasizes) rather than an integral component of his group.

Interaction vs. Reaction

Another pattern of considerable prominence found in the African-American life experience is the interactional pattern of call-and-response. This pattern has its most dramatic example in the Fundamentalist churches in which one finds the preacher's speech transformed into a litany of sentences and responses from the listeners. The spontaneous reactions and supportive statements of encouragement involve the speaker and listeners in a dialogue of interaction. This stands in contrast to the traditional Euro-American speaker/audience setting in which the speaker or expert dispenses wisdom and the audience listens attentively and reacts only at appropriately defined moments.

This pattern, though most colorful in the speaker setting, is a pervasive occurrence within African culture. This on-going sys-

tem of interaction and social reinforcement maintains relationships between people in almost all settings. Even a brief observation will reveal a considerable difference in the classrooms of many African-American teachers and their Euro-American counterparts. The African-American teacher(if she is true to her cultural forms) will have much more of an interactional relationship with her students. This is an alternative to the more passive requirement of the traditional classroom where the child is expected to quietly absorb and react only in some systematic and pre-defined form.

The passivity requirement of the traditional classroom probably accounts for one of the most common complaints of behavioral problems among African-American children. This complaint is one of hyperactivity and general classroom disorder. The hyperactivity has been attributed to everything from broken homes to brain damage. More often than not, such hyperactivity is an adaptation to boredom. The boredom is in direct response to the excessively low activity level of the classroom which so sharply contrasts with the home environments with which they are familiar.

The use of instructional methods which would maximize student response and involvement are likely to be much more effective in reaching African-American children. The teacher benefits from the direct and immediate feedback and the student gains a sense of connectedness with what is being presented. Singing activities often stimulate such resounding interest because they involve the kind of group participation which reaffirms the sense of oneness, which is such a critical cultural motif among African people(Nobles).¹³

African Thought

Another distinctive characteristic of the African-American child is the form of thinking and problem-solving which he has gained from the conditioning of his cultural and life experience.

This characteristic is a strong reliance on internal cues and reactions as a means of problem-solving. This is in contrast to the enforced reliance on external cues which is required for most problem solutions in a classroom setting. This form of problem solving receives very little respect in Western culture because it is viewed as too subjective. Objectivity is considered as the hallmark of scientific enterprise. Though objective observation is critical in the acquisition of certain kinds of knowledge, it is not the exclusive means of acquiring knowledge.

This form of thinking has been called the function of "intuition" by Carl Jung(Jacob).¹⁴ He is one of the few European theorists who has described this characteristic in some detail. As observed by Dr. Jung, this particular thought function does not have any considerable prominence in the West though it is a highly developed function among African and Asian peoples. We might add that it has persisted as an essential dimension of African-American thought. There is a cultural respect for internal cues and "hunches" as a means of acquiring information. Despite the scientific unreliability of this form of information getting, it offers some advantages which reliance on the external simply cannot produce because of its limitations in time and space.

Because of this affective component to cognition for the African-American child, he is particularly vulnerable to his emotional reactions interfering with his learning. His sense of being disliked by a teacher can devastate his intellectual performance. On the other hand his sense of being liked and respected by the teacher can wrought wonderous improvements in his intellectual performance. This probably accounts for the frequent observation of rather extreme fluctuation in performance between classes for the

same student. His subjective reaction to the teacher can have a rather severe effect upon his performance.

This reliance on intuition is very adaptive in an environment where learning and problem-solving usually occur in relationship to people. Such inner processes are very informative about the inner processes of other people and provides information beyond the particular information that is verbally communicated. However, in a setting where the focus and the orientation is on objects, then there are predictable difficulties when such objects have no inner reality nor is there a medium between the object and oneself that has such an inner reality.

Many African-American children reveal previously unexpressed psychomotor and reasoning skills when object manipulation is placed in an interpersonal context. When the object manipulation is done as a means of interacting with another person, the task which previously received little effective attention from the child suddenly takes on new significance for him. It seems that African-American children are not as prone to manipulation of objects for manipulation sake as Euro-American children. Even very young children show a decided preference for human rather than object interactions.

Reliance on intuition makes African-American children particularly adept in social relations because such a facility relies heavily upon empathy. In fact, the African-American child's adeptness at getting people to do what he wants them to do has frequently been described as a psychopathic manipulateness. In fact, this is only applied empathy and it utilizes the initial social skill that we learn as human beings and that is: how to get people to act when you want them to act. So long as the setting is an interpersonal setting, as we observed above, the child is comfortable

and efficient. When the learning situation is devoid of human involvement, then frequently the African child experiences difficulty.

Spontaneity

Another characteristic of the African-American child is his capacity to be spontaneous. His facility for easy, rapid adaptation to different situations is one of the most remarkable strengths of the African child. The capacity to respond quickly and appropriately to environmental changes facilitates the African-American child's basic comfort in most settings, where there are positive interpersonal relations.

The African-American environment is a constantly changing and multi-faceted one. From the moment the child is born, within an African home, he is exposed to a world in continuous movement. Many faces constantly passing through; radios and record players often going in conjunction with TV sets; many activities simultaneously in progress requires a facility of ready adaptation. It is important to see the contrast with the middle class nursery where one learns to adjust to little more than mobiles over his cradle and an occasional face bringing nourishment.

In these communities the child learns early the importance of constant change and rapid adaptation to that change. Such a facility is a genuine strength in learning to deal with a realistic environment which requires constant adjustment and readjustment. Even an ego strength such as this becomes counter-adaptive in a setting which emphasizes constancy of environment and behavior. In the typical classroom setting, this real ego strength becomes a paradoxical disability in an environment which is based on rigidity and only stereotyped responses are supported. Therefore, there is a considerable discrepancy between the constantly changing environment of

the home and the relatively stagnant quality of the classroom. A-
gain, we can see some justification for the behavioral difficulties
produced by such a radically deviant environment as the typical
classroom.

The African-American child's spontaneity is as present in his
rapid adaptation to new environments as it is in other aspects of
his behavior. He is equally spontaneous with his feelings, gener-
ally responding directly and honestly. The African-American child's
spontaneous and well-coordinated motor activity has been well-docu-
mented(Wilson).¹⁵ In most instances such apt responsiveness would
be viewed as healthy and indicative of a high level of personal ad-
justment. In environments which are by-and-large unnatural(from
the perspective of the familiar environment of the child) these same
behaviors are likely to be viewed as ineffective and in many in-
stances even as disruptive.

Conclusion

There are several assumptions and inevitable generalizations
which are made in a discussion of this nature. One assumption is
of a fairly homogeneous African-American community. We are aware
of class variables and the compelling arguments which suggest that
racial differences are ultimately class differences. The charac-
teristics which have been identified herein, are fairly consistent-
ly present at all class levels of African-Americans. Certainly,
the more alienated people become from their indigenous culture the
less prevalent are these cultural expressions. However, it is a
safe assumption that an African-American child is much more likely
to act in accord with these characteristics of his indigenous cul-
ture than he is to act as the more alien Euro-American culture
would suggest.

The other issue which has been emphasized in this discussion is the degree to which the classroom based on Euro-American assumptions about child behavior is an alien environment for the African-American child. From just the vantage point of the few characteristics discussed previously, the remarkable fact is that the African-American child adjusts to the classroom, at all! A predictable reaction is the minority of African-American children who show some degree of real difficulty in adjusting to the often grossly alien environment of the typical Euro-American classroom setting.

We can only speculate about how much untapped potential has fallen prey to the classroom setting which was unresponsive to these unique characteristics and needs. At a time when the push towards a kind of cultural pluralism is taking over our educational settings we are hopeful that African-American scholars will address these unique and potentially powerful contributions to the so-called educational melting pot.

FOOTNOTES

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